

Eleanor Marx 1891

Report from Great Britain and Ireland to the Delegates of the Brussels International Congress, 1891.

Presented by the Gas Workers and General Labourers' Union; the Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League; the Bloomsbury Socialist Society; and the Battersea Labour League.

Transcribed: from the original by Ted Crawford.

Though unsigned this is by Eleanor Marx which she states in her letter to her sister Laura Lafargue. Cited by Yvonne Kapp in her excellent biography. (*Eleanor Marx*, Vol. II, p.479, Lawrence & Wishart, 1976.). She also translated some other national reports into English. Note the emphasis given to women workers.

Introduction. The following report, which we lay before the Delegates to the International Socialist Workers' Congress of 1891, does not pretend to be complete or exhaustive. It is simply meant to be a summary of the more important work done in connection with the Working Class Movement in Great Britain and Ireland during the last two years, i.e., since the last International Congress in 1889.

We also wish it to be understood that we do not pretend to speak for a British Labour Party. Unhappily, there is as yet no such party in existence, though signs are not wanting that it is in process of formation. No doubt other English reports will also be handed in. For our own, we can only say that we believe it to be accurate so far as it goes, and we hope the facts and data here collected may be of some interest and of some use to our fellow delegates.

New Unionism and Socialism. The two years with which we deal have been years of most extraordinary activity. They mark, indeed, the beginning of a new era in the history of the working class movement in Great Britain and Ireland. Before entering upon details, a word upon the general tendency and drift of this movement — a movement that is usually spoken of as the “New Unionism.” This tendency and drift have been and are undeniably Socialistic. It is true that in England the terms “Labour Party” and “Socialist Party” are not yet, as on the Continent, convertible; but they are rapidly becoming so, and this despite the fact that not a few of the “New Unionists” themselves would be the first to vigorously deny it. It is true also that with an immense mass of the people — with the majority of them, perhaps the Socialism is vague and unconscious, and that we have not, in the Continental sense, a Socialist party. But well nigh all the “leaders” of this new movement in the United Kingdom are Socialists, and “Socialist” and “Socialism,” once terms of reproach and scorn, are becoming the best passports to the respect and trust of the working class. This is due to the fact that the workers have found the Socialists their

truest and most reliable friends. With this feeling of trust in the Socialists and their teaching has grown the class-consciousness of the workers, who have begun to understand that they are living in the midst of a class-war and with that understanding has grown the determination that in the United Kingdom, as well as on the Continent, there shall be a Labour Party different from and opposed to all the old political parties — a party fighting for the working class against the master class — a party that shall make itself felt at all parliamentary elections, and at every municipal, vestry, school board, and other election. Great as the victories of the New Unionism have been; magnificent as the work is of organising thousands upon thousands of hitherto unorganised workers, this growing class-consciousness of the British workers is a greater, a more noteworthy fact than either of the two others.

The Socialists. And this growing class-consciousness is due to the teachings of the Socialists, to their energetic and untiring labours. For years there were Johns amongst them preaching in the wilderness; but no crowds gathered, anxious to be baptised into the new faith. Nothing daunted, the work went on. To-day the result is visible.

The Socialist programme is now, consciously or unconsciously, the programme of the “New Unionism.” Yet, as we have already said, there is no Socialist party in England. There are a great many Socialist parties all doing good work in their way; but they are sects rather than a party; they each have, if not a little Hell, at least a little coterie of their own. Of these Socialist parties, the largest and the one that has done more, perhaps, than any of the other Socialist organisations — with the help of many now no longer counted amongst its members — to spread the teachings of scientific Socialism among the workers, is the Social Democratic Federation. Then there is the Fabian Society, which proved a boon to those middle-class folk too honest to be contented with the present conditions of society; too educated to throw in their lot with thy Salvation Army; too superior to identify themselves wholly with the profane vulgar. The Fabians, besides giving an immense number of lectures, and besides publishing some useful statistics, have, in the Provinces, done more. There they are less superior, and there they have been of no small service in bringing together Socialists anxious to help in the work of organisation, but not able to see their way clearly to working with the Social Democratic Federation. There is also the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, which, besides doing much good educational work, may claim the honour of having initiated the May Day Eight Hours Demonstration in the United Kingdom.

There are, moreover, a large number of other London and Provincial Socialist Societies, all well meaning, and more or less useful. None of these Socialist organisations, it is true, is very strong numerically; their strength and influence are to be found rather in the new working class movement, and in the general tendency of that movement, than within the limits of the organisations themselves. How deeply, however, these Socialist teachings have, whether consciously or unconsciously, impressed themselves upon the masses, may perhaps be best gathered from a few quotations from the “Address” to the Rules of the Gas Workers and General Labourers’ Union.

“Trades Unionism has done excellent work in the past, and in it lies the hope of the workers for the future, that is the Trades Unionisms which clearly recognises that today there are only two classes, the producing working class, and the possessing master class. The interests of these two classes are opposed to each other. The masters have known this a long time, the workers are beginning to see it, and so they are forming Trades Unions to protect themselves, and to get as much as they can of the product of their labour. They are beginning to understand that their only hope lies in themselves, and that from the masters as a class they can expect no help; that divided they fall, united they stand.”

The immediate objects of this Union are “the improvement of the material condition of its members; the raising them from mere beasts of burden to human beings; the making brighter and happier the home of every worker, the saving of little children from the hard, degrading bitter life to which they are condemned today; the dividing more equally between all men and women the tears and laughter, the sorrow and the joy, the labour and the leisure of the world. It is important that all members should understand the necessity for and the aims of this Union; that they should accept and loyally carry out its rules; that they should remember that the interests of all workers are one, and a wrong done to any kind of labour is a wrong done to the whole of the working class, and that victory or defeat of any portion of the army of labour is a gain or a loss to the whole of that army, which by its organisation and union is marching steadily and irresistibly forward to its ultimate goal — the emancipation of the working class.”

Old and New Unionism Of the power, of the wealth, of the old Unions it is not necessary to say much at this time of day. The good work done by them in the past no one is likely to forget or to deny. But it is an indisputable fact that for many years the old Unions have ceased to be an active and militant body, and that the vast mass of the army of labour has been left absolutely outside all organisation by them. Nay, it was to a large extent the aim and object of these old Unions to *limit* the number of their members and it is only recently that they have begun to recognise the suicidal character of such a policy. Since the formation of the new Unions, the old ones have been urged into a fresh activity, and they are now beginning to admit that the successes of the past do not absolve them from all effort in the present. Even with this newly awakened enthusiasm, it is worth noting that in such great organisations as those of the Engineers, Compositors, Carpenters and Joiners, Cabinet-makers, Boiler-makers, Plumbers, Masons, Painters, Plasterers, etc., etc., there are well nigh as many men outside the ranks of the societies as within them. For example, in their report for 1889, the Engineers say: “There is still a great necessity for the enrolment of members; this is borne out by the fact that in all cases where disputes are pending, there are always to be found a large number of non-society men ever ready to fill our places, and become the tools of the employers — there are large districts in England and Scotland where non-society men are the rule and our members the exception.” In the report of the same Society for 1887 we are told “there are thousands of eligible men outside the pale of our society who ought to be inside.”

It is also at once an interesting and a sad comment that in this, the strongest and richest of all unions, there was expended, in 1889, £105,439 11s. 10½d. for “sick benefits,” “funerals,” “superannuation,” “accidents,” etc. — in a word, for benefit purposes, as

against £1,820 17s. 8d. expended in actual trade disputes, either for their own trade or in assisting other workers. In 1890, the benefit expenditure was £129,103 4s. 2d., the “fighting expenditure” £5,688 11s- 0d. Even more eloquent than these figures is the fact that on the Eight Hours question — in a society numbering 62,895 members — only the following small vote was given: -

Eight hours per day	— For 8,149
do.	— Against 1,290
48 hours per week	— For 8,007
do	— Against 1,118
Eight hours by legal enactment, with penalty for infringement	— For 3,275
do.	— Against 4,901
Eight hours by trade union effort ...	— For 6,546
Do	— Against 1,251

Again, of the 14,000 Compositors in London only 9,100 are society men at present. But if the old Unions had been doing so little for themselves and for the workers of their own trades, they had done absolutely nothing for the unskilled, for the “general labourers,” for the women workers. Yet these “unskilled” workers are “by far the most numerous, important, and essential of all.”

The New Unions. The first successful attempt of the so-called “unskilled” workers to do for themselves that which — to their own greatest harm — the “skilled” Unions had never seriously tried to do for them, was in the March of 1889 when the Gas Workers of London determined to organise and to demand what no other body of men had yet, as a body, demanded — an eight hours working day. It was not the first time Gas Workers had tried to start a Union, but their former efforts — those made in 1872 and in 1876 although, to some extent, aided by experienced and by well-known “old unionists”- resulted in dire failure. But in 1889 — with the help, be it remembered of many prominent Socialists — the Gas Workers were more successful. Three months after the formation of their Union, they were able to hold a “monster meeting” to celebrate on July 27th a victory greater than any achieved by older and richer unions, *i.e.* the granting by the gas companies of an eight hours day, without any reduction and in many cases with an actual increase of wage. The news of this victory spread like wildfire; the example of the London men was followed in the provinces, and branches of the Union were everywhere started. Before long enormous numbers of those workers known as “general

labourers” applied to the Executive of the Gas Workers’ Union, to ask if they could also become members. The request was considered by the Gas Workers’ Executive and gladly granted, and the Union became “The National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland.” Nor was this all. A request to admit women into the Union was also enthusiastically conceded; it was the first, and is still, we believe, the only large Trade Union in which men and women are treated on an equal footing; which allows women to be represented at its Annual Conferences, and allows woman to serve on its Executive. To tell of the work done by this Union, would take too much of the small space at our disposal, but in spite of many a bitter struggle; in spite of some defeats, it is today the best organised Union of unskilled workers: it counts within its ranks men and women belonging to over seventy different kinds of labour: it has obtained for thousands of men an eight hours day; for thousands upon thousands of others an increase of wages, ranging from five to as much as 50 per cent per week.

Taught by bitter experience, these “unskilled” men and women were, with the Socialists, the first to recognise the necessity of political action, and of labour legislation. One of the objects of this Union is to “obtain legislation for the bettering of the lives of the working class.” And just as it recognised the need for workers to govern for themselves, so it has steadfastly maintained, and earnestly tried to bring about (1) National, (2) International Federation. *Nationally*, the work of federation is progressing, though, unfortunately, many difficulties have been thrown in the way by the selfishness and short-sighted policy of other Unions of “unskilled” labour. However, some eight Unions of this sort are now federated, while some dozen Unions belong to the “Shipping and Carrying” Federation. And this is only a beginning. *Internationally*, the Gas Workers and General Labourers’ Union are now in direct communication with some thirteen or fourteen Associations or Unions, representing the organised workers of ten different nations. While dealing with this question of International Federation, it will not be out of place to add one word upon the work of this Union in Ireland. Here, for the first time, we have the beginnings of a genuine *Working Class Movement*, as altogether distinct from the *Nationalist Movement*. Not only does the Union count at least 25,000 members in Ireland; those members belong alike to North and South. For the first time within the memory of man, huge indoor meetings and outdoor demonstrations have been held in the North of Ireland, Orangemen and Catholics meeting together for one common object, striving towards one common end — the organisation of Labour against Capitalism. In Ireland, as in England, the workers are beginning to recognise their common interests. No longer can the English capitalist use the evicted Irish peasant against his English brother. No words were more enthusiastically cheered in Dublin, at a huge demonstration in Phoenix Park — as they are constantly being cheered in the North and in the South of Ireland — than these — “Let Ireland be free, but let it be an Ireland of free workers; it matters little to the men and women of Ireland if they are exploited by Nationalist or by Orangeman; the agricultural labourer sees his enemy in the landlord, as the industrial worker sees his in the capitalist.” To-day the workers of Ireland, North and South, are holding out their hands to each other, and to their English, Scotch and Welsh brethren. All this has been the work of less than two years.

Important as the work of the G.W. & G.L.U. has been, and is, the results of their work are even greater than the growth of their own organisation.

The Dock Strike. The Dock Strike of 1889 is now a historical fact. But there is not the slightest doubt that this remarkable movement was the direct result of the Gas Workers' victory. Hundreds of men shift between docks and gas works. If these Gas Workers could combine, why could not Dockers? Once the question asked, the answer became certain. They *could* combine. Yes, they, the poorest, the most despised, the hopeless portion of the proletariat could show they were something other than a drag upon the rest of the workers. They, too, could stand together; they, too, could fight for their rights. Indeed, they did what many a "skilled Union" has failed to do. No account of the "Great Strike" need here be given; we are only concerned to point out (1) that it was the direct result of the Gas Workers' Movement; (2) that it in turn helped to bring about the organisation of countless other workers.

It is true, and is to be regretted, that the Dockers' Union has not been so progressive a one as was hoped at first. It has hindered instead of helped in bringing about the federation of all unskilled Unions; until quite recently it was even opposed to the *Legal* Eight Hours movement, and in the May Demonstration of 1890, threw in its lot with the "old," not with the "new" Unions. But this is probably rather the misfortune of the Union than its fault, for which its leaders, and not the bulk of the members, are responsible. That the Dockers could combine, could organise, could fight and win a magnificent victory, are facts whose importance no subsequent error can minimise. To give an even approximate account of the extraordinary movement that followed the Great Strike would be to write a volume. But this movement has not only organised some 200,000 to 250,000 hitherto unorganised workers; it has helped to awaken the old Unions from the lethargy into which they had fallen. If not quite "Sleeping Beauties" these were certainly sleeping partners in the labour movement. To take only one or two examples out of many: the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, which for 20 years had contented itself with being a sick and benefit society, is now struggling to emulate the example of the unskilled workers, and is recognising that shorter hours of labour are, after all, the highest benefit a union can bestow upon its members; and so aristocratic and conservative a Union as that of the Bookbinders has demanded, and almost universally obtained, an eight hours day.

If, on the economic side of the struggle between Labour and Capitalism, the New Unionism to-day represents the more militant portion of the workers, it also represents those who believe in using the political machinery for the benefit of their class. Here, again, the "older" Unions are gradually accepting the teaching of the "new" ones- Thus it is worth noting that although the older and more conservative Unions were in great force at the Liverpool Trades Union Congress of 1890, of the 70 resolutions proposed, no less than 44 called for Government or Municipal "interference." And at Liverpool, as elsewhere, *the* question of the Congress was that of the Legal Eight Hours Working Day

The Eight Hours Day Movement. The first steps towards actually securing an eight hours working day have been taken in Great Britain and Ireland in two classes of workers

— the unskilled Gas Workers and the skilled Miners. But while the Gas Workers, from the beginning, were agreed in declaring for a *universal* and *legal* eight hours day the Miners were, and even still largely are, interested in the matter chiefly for themselves and their own special class of labour, and they are not yet quite unanimous on the question of an eight hours day, even for themselves.

But if the eight hours question had been, for some time, made a chief “plank” in the working class agitation, more especially by the Socialists, and by those new Unions which are not afraid of being identified with Socialist measures, even before they have become respectable, it was not till the beginning of 1890 that the legal eight hours became the burning question it is now. It became so burning a question through the work of organisation for carrying out the May-Day Demonstration.

May-Day Demonstration, 1890. The history of this May-Day Demonstration in England, as in all other countries, is curious and interesting. The idea of such a demonstration had, of course, been broached at the Paris International Congress, of the Rue Rochechouart, of 1889. Two of those who had been present at this Congress, felt it their duty to call the attention of English workers to the resolution endorsed by the representatives of twenty-two nations:

“There shall be organised a great International Demonstration on a fixed date, so that in all countries and towns simultaneously on the given day the workers shall demand of the authorities the legal reduction of the working day to eight hours.”

The result was that in January, 1890, the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, and, a week or so later, the Gasworkers and General Labourers’ Union, decided to carry out a demonstration in Hyde Park in favour of a *Legal Eight Hours Working Day*

A joint committee of three members of each of the above societies was appointed to start the preliminary work of organisation. On March 16th, 1890, a meeting of 75 delegates from working class organisations was held, and a formal resolution carried to “Demonstrate for an Eight Hours Day,” and at the next delegate meeting, even more largely representative, the now historic “Central Committee” was appointed. The work done by the Committee was enormous, and the difficulties of that work were increased by the fact that the largest of the Socialist organisations — the Social Democratic Federation — was opposed to the demonstration, and that all the older, and even a few of the new Unions, while willing to demand, after the old method, an “Eight Hours Day” by means of trade union combination, were bitterly and violently hostile to the demand for a *Legalised Eight Hours Day*.

Above all, the idea of a Legal Eight Hours Demonstration was new, and like Snug, the Joiner, the British workman being somewhat slow of study, it took some time and work to make the idea of a demonstration popular. The London Trades Council, too, originally unwilling to demonstrate at all, but finally seeing the likelihood of a large demonstration anyhow, decided to demonstrate, but refused to demonstrate with the Central Committee, and insisted upon the omission of the word “Legal.” It is also worth recording that very

many of the most enthusiastic “Legal” demonstrators of the present year, 1891, were even more enthusiastically opposed to any such political action in 1890. One well-known “leader,” at a meeting held in the Memorial Hall, by the Trades Council, on 23rd April, 1890, solemnly declared that the English workers were not “ripe” for an Eight Hours Working Day, while another “leader,” on the same occasion, was equally emphatic in protesting against the “Legal” side of the matter. It is only fair to add that both these gentlemen, with the usual zeal of converts, were particularly to the fore in speaking at the “Legal” Demonstration twelve months later. They had discovered it was not the workers’ but themselves who had not been “ripe” for political action.

May Day, 1890. It had originally been intended to demonstrate in England, as in most other countries, on the *First* of May. This, however, was found to be absolutely impracticable, so the Legal Eight Hours Demonstration was fixed for the 4th — the first Sunday in May. The Trades Council organised their non-legal demonstration for the same day and place. Both demonstrations were great successes, but the success of the former, both as regarded the mass of demonstrators and the excellence of the organisation, was such, that as we have already said, the Trades Council which had gone to the Park to denounce political action, and the superiority of trade union effort over legislative methods, remained to be converted.

The first sign of grace was the extraordinary debate and vote on the Eight Hours Question at the Liverpool Trade Union Congress in the September of 1890. Here the resolution for a Legal Eight Hours Day, which twelve months before had been out-voted (at the Dundee Congress) by 88 votes to 63, was carried by 193 votes to 153.

The real significance of this vote was only fully realised when it became necessary to once more organise for the next May-Day. In 1891, we no longer had a Central Committee and a Trade Union Committee, working for two different Demonstrations; but one Committee composed of ten members, five representing the Committee appointed by the Legal Eight Hours Demonstration Committee, and five representing the Trades Council. On Sunday, May 3rd, one huge mass of demonstrators — some 250,000 at least — went to Hyde Park. They came from North, South, East, and West; they marched miles upon miles; their watch-word, “Legal Eight Hours Day.” On the same day, the largest labour demonstration ever held in Ireland was celebrated at the Phoenix Park, Dublin; and while we cannot, for Great Britain and Ireland claim that universality of the movement which characterised it on the Continent, we may at least point out that on May 3rd, 1891, Demonstrations were held in a far larger number of provincial towns than on May 4th, 1890, and we may be sure that next year the meetings will have again grown in number and in importance. The English May-Days were gigantic successes; and it is but just to remember that this success is due to the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, which initiated the movement; to the Gas Workers and General Labourers’ Union, without which it could never have been carried out, and which, in this matter, were once more in the van of all the other Unions, old and new; and finally, so far as the 1891 Demonstration is concerned, to the Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League.

Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League. This League was the immediate outcome of the first May-Day Demonstration. It was felt that the Central Committee which had done so much to make not only the Legal Demonstration a success, but to force into action the then unwilling Trades Council, had still more important work to do, and that the Eight Hours Movement must be constantly kept before the workers. A delegate meeting of all who had helped to organise the 1890 Demonstration was therefore summoned, and it was resolved: (1) That a permanent organisation should be formed; (2) That it should have for its objects the obtaining of a Legal Eight Hours Working Day, and such of the Paris (1889) resolutions as are not yet embodied in the Statute Law of England; (3) The formation of a distinct Labour Party with the Paris resolutions for minimum programme. It was also decided that the affiliation of organised bodies of workers should be sought for, rather than those of individual members. Like most of the new and active organisations, the Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League is poor in everything but energy. Yet, besides being chiefly answerable for the success of the Hyde Park Demonstration of 1891, it has been able to send speakers and lecturers to innumerable meetings, and in the short time of its existence has enrolled between thirty and forty bodies of organised workers, besides a number of individual helpers. Naturally the League recognises the international character of the working class movement, and delegates representing it were present at the Calais Trade Union Congress, the Lille Socialist Congress, and the Halle (German Social Democratic) Congress in the October of last year.

We have, so far, dealt almost wholly with organisations of town workers, and these are, for the most part, organisations of men. There are two other classes of labour to which we must also refer, even though *only* in passing — workers who, unhappily, are still left almost without organisation. (1) Agricultural workers; (2) Women workers.

Agricultural Labourers. It is, unfortunately, a fact, and as such must be noted by us, that the English agricultural labourers to-day are less well organised than they were some years ago. Many attempts have recently been made — and they have been notoriously unsuccessful — to organise these workers. The reasons for the efforts and for their present failure are equally clear. To the English town worker — especially to the army of unskilled town workers — the agricultural labourer is *the* great danger. Just as the English capitalist played off the evicted victim of the Irish landlord against the English industrial worker, so the first resort of the English employer in any question of dispute with his employees is the agricultural labourer. The Gas Worker, the Docker, the thousand and one “unskilled” workers, know this only too well. It is therefore a question of self-defence with the town worker to help to educate and organise the agricultural labourer.

But these agricultural labourers are difficult to organise. First, there is the curious distrust of townfolk; then there is the unspeakable poverty and wretchedness. Every word written twenty years ago upon the misery of this class of workers is to-day doubly true, for the poverty and misery have been intensified. There is, besides the poverty, the ignorance of these men and women, their isolation, their terrible dependence upon parson and landlord. But things are brightening day by day. Even these men and women seem to be

growing conscious of their need for protection against their exploiters; day by day they are realising — and here again the capitalist is helping to dig his own grave — their fraternity of poverty and suffering with the town worker. Even as we write, we hear of a new campaign among these men and women that promises well. The agitation is still too recent to allow of any definite result being known, but this at least may be said, that in one county, in eight weeks, some 2,000 members were enrolled into a union.

Women Workers. If it has been found difficult to organise agricultural labour, it has been found as difficult, perhaps more difficult, to organise the women workers in towns, and especially in London. Nor is the reason far to seek. Even the working man for the most part still looks upon the women of the household as domestic animals, more or less his personal property. What the woman earned has usually been considered in the light of a useful additional sum to the general income of the home, not as the wage paid an independent worker for actual work done. And the woman herself reduced to the very lowest verge of misery, of despair, and of dependence, earning a wage that — even in the more skilled kinds of labour — generally means starvation, having, in addition to the long hours of labour for the employer, to do work of the “domestic” sort for her more immediate task-master; or where she is a widow, or unmarried mother with children dependent upon her, or even when she is alone in the world, having to toil on long after men for the most part have ceased work — what time could she have — even had she the desire — for attending meetings or for organising? Still of recent years the inexorable logic of facts is doing for the women workers what it has been doing for the unskilled men workers, forcing them to recognise their true position. Above all, men are beginning to see that where the woman does not work *with* the man, the employer uses her against him, and that, therefore, from even the simplest motives of self-preservation, the man must try and help the woman to fight with him against their common enemy and exploiter. Here again the effect of the extraordinary revival, mediately the result of the Gas Workers’ eight hours victory, and immediately of the Dockers’ victory, was noticeable. Hundreds of women have been organised within the last two years, and, as we have already said, in the G.W. & G.L.U. women and men are admitted on the same footing, as, it need not be said, they are in all Socialist organisations. And this recognition of the necessity for the general organising of women workers, especially by men, is, like much else, the result of the last two years’ agitation, it, in turn, being, as we have said, the result of the Socialist propaganda.

Of course we do not say that no attempts at organising women had formerly been made. The admirably conducted strike of Bryant and May’s match girls; the efforts of many notable women to organise their sister workers — will occur to all who have any knowledge of the working class movement in England. But the results for the most part were, as compared with the efforts, disappointingly small.

It should be added that in many of the northern factory towns the women are as well organised as the men. But not in all. Thus in such enormous factories as those at Manningham, e.g., the women had been utterly neglected. Not till the men came into deadly struggle with the “master” did they see that the neglecting of the women had been

a mistake. The mistake once recognised, has since been made good. Thus everywhere is the capitalist unconsciously pickling the rod for his own capitalist back.

Federation. That the skilled and unskilled workers — that men and women are beginning to recognise the oneness of their cause is certain, and with that recognition they are learning the need for federation nationally and internationally. As we have pointed out above, the unfortunate jealousies among some of the unskilled unions — or, to speak more correctly, the jealousies among the leaders of such Unions — (not to speak of the skilled ones) have stood in the way of complete federation. Thus, one attempt at federation was wrecked by the refusal of a particular Union to recognise the ticket of another, and by the desire to confine the federating to certain branches of a particular trade. But the mistake of doing this, like the mistake of “closing books” to new members, is gradually impressing itself upon the men, and, whatever may be the opinions of individuals, the mass of the men are leaning towards both a national and then an international federating of all workers.

Federation of Capitalists. Here again the capitalists are helping the workers by showing of them the solidarity among themselves and by their own efforts at federation. Within the last few months, the world has heard much of the Shipping Federation, started with the avowed intention of combatting trades unions in general, and more especially the Union of Sailors and Firemen. The struggle between this federation of masters and of the Union men grows every day keener and more keen. One admirable result it has already had. That federation of workers, which seemed afar off, has now come within measurable distance. The employers are showing that, despite all competition the interests of the capitalists are one. The workers are learning that, in the same way, the interests of labour, skilled and unskilled, are one also.

Those who know the sharp line that once divided the English trades unions one from the other, those who know especially how the “skilled” worker was wont to look down upon his “unskilled” brother, much as the employer looked down upon him, will realise that this means little short of a revolution in the general attitude of the English working class.

Strikes. The questions of the federation of capital on the one side and of labour on the other, naturally brings us to that of strikes and lock-outs. Of these, the last two years have witnessed greater ones, and more, than many a long year before. To give anything like a history of these labour struggles, would lead us now too far afield. We can only point out a fact or two. One thing certainly has impressed itself upon the workers: that a strike is very unlikely to be successful if it is not won quickly. It is true that the Dock strike was a long one, and resulted in victory. But it was fought under quite special conditions. And, above all, it should be remembered that it was really won not in England but in Australia. The £30,000 from Australia won that strike, as surely as the general apathy of English and other workers lost that of the Gas Workers. But a strike won is not always a pure gain, nor an unsuccessful strike of necessity a pure loss. Sometimes, to misquote the laureate, “it is better to have fought and lost, than never to have fought at all”, just as it is sometimes both greater wisdom and greater courage to refuse to be dragged into a hopeless struggle. And there is one other aspect of the strike question to which we would

call attention. After the Great Strike of 1889 when the Dockers were the wonder of the world, there was a veritable epidemic of strikes. The workers were seized with the idea that strikes alone were going to solve the social question: that they had only to join a Union and to strike, in order to gain all they wanted. So that the failure of the South Metropolitan, the Scotch Railway Workers, and many other strikes, has really been less of a loss than gain. For it has reminded the workers that trades union efforts alone can effect little, and that their economic freedom can only be attained through the taking hold of political power, and using that power in the interests of their own class. The successful, like the unsuccessful strikes — those of the Dockers and South Metropolitan Gas Workers; of the Busmen; of the Sailors and Firemen; of the Barge men, and of the Blast-furnacemen; all of the hundreds of large and small strikes of the last two years, point the same moral and adorn the same tale — that Trades Unionism and Strikes alone will not emancipate the working class.

English Freedom. To one other matter this question of strikes and labour struggles also leads us. There is, on the Continent — there was until recently in England — an idea that from police interference and tyranny the English worker was now happily free. That this is not so, recent events have only too clearly proved. Thus, to take one example. At Plymouth, men belonging to the Gas Workers, Dockers, and Bristol and West of England Labourers' Unions, all unions of "unskilled" workers, have been prosecuted and condemned (their case of appeal is not yet decided) for "intimidation," although their whole crime consisted in bidding members of their Unions to "cease work." "Use no violence," said the chief *intimidator*, "use no immoderate language, but quietly cease work and go home." This all important case has been taken up by the London Trades Council, and will be fought out in the highest Law Courts. "If" says the Secretary of the Council, "this is legal intimidation — which is to subject working people to criminal conviction, punishable by imprisonment with hard labour — it is well we should know it once for all."¹¹

Indeed, in all recent strikes the police have not merely interfered unduly, they have done everything to provoke riots. Nor does the Government even hesitate to call out troops. At Leeds, the G.W. & G.L.U., be it remembered, won their strike literally by fighting, not merely the police, but the 400 soldiers who had been drafted into the town to "preserve order," while on the mere rumour (a false one, by the way) that the Gas Workers of Beckton intended striking, orders were sent to Chatham to have three battalions in readiness to proceed to Beckton The Home Office and War Department were also satisfied that the situation was a threatening one. . . . The commander of the garrison at Chatham had notified he could spare about 1,000 men, ... and these ... were paraded The men were served with 20 rounds of ball cartridge each The men were held in readiness to start." As to the struggle between the Sailors and Firemen's Union, let it be noted that the secretary of that Union was condemned to six weeks' imprisonment for "intimidation"; and that the fight between the federation of employers and the men's Union grows daily more intense and more bitter.

Labour Representation. Perhaps the most striking feature of the New Unionism and of the active working class movement, is the great importance they attach to labour

representation on all public bodies. The necessity of such representation had, to a certain extent, been recognised in the past, even by workmen's organisations which had not been imbued with Socialistic doctrines. It had, however, been left to a small number of the large trade unions of the North and West of England — mostly miners — to carry the idea into practical effect. The result has not been all that could be desired from the working class point of view, for, with the exception of two or three men, all these so-called labour representatives in the House of Commons are followers of one of the two great political parties. But at last the workers of Great Britain and even of Ireland are beginning to see that if their wishes are to be carried out, their representatives must place the interests of labour before the interests of party. The new movement, therefore, seeks to secure the return of men to Parliament pledged to fight both political parties, if necessary, so that the claims of labour shall not be ignored. In this direction active work is being done both in London and the provinces. Thus, in London, there are labour candidates before at least half-a-dozen constituencies whose programmes range from the Revolutionary-Social-Democratic one, to the Fabian-Socialist-Radical. In the provinces the same activity is being displayed, and at the next General Election the return of a fair number of labour candidates is probable.

Our foreign friends probably do not realise how difficult the want of a democratic basis in all elections in the United Kingdom has made it for the working class to secure the return of those pledged to their programme. The enormous cost of elections, the non-payment of these expenses by the State, and the non-payment of Members, the want of a second ballot, the systematically complicated condition of the franchise and of the registration laws, are difficulties of an almost insurmountable character to the return of working class representatives. But the greatest difficulty is the want which has been already referred to — of a national working class party. It is to be hoped that the return of at least some working class candidates to the House of Commons at the next election, will help in the formation of such a party, with a definite plan of action.

The political work of the new movement — owing to the difficulties referred to — has therefore had to proceed along somewhat different lines from the running of labour candidates. But where it has been found impossible to run such a candidate in any district during an election, pressure has been brought to bear upon the candidates of other parties before the electors, and the success of a candidate has in many instances depended upon his acceptance of certain of the points in the general labour programme. And this holds good not only for England and Scotland, but for Ireland also, where both Parnellites and anti-Parnellites to-day are trying to secure the Labour vote.

The most important work, however, of the new movement, in connection with labour representation, has been done in local and in municipal elections. The Vestries — soon to be replaced by more democratic bodies — Boards of Guardians, County Councils, and all the administrative bodies which are in closest touch with the people, are looked to as the centres of future communes. The workers are realising that these bodies must be the owners of all monopolies which are now under the control of private capitalists. To this end the return of representatives of labour is being pushed forward with the same energy for municipal bodies as for Parliament. In many provincial towns labour representatives

have been returned to School Boards, Town Councils, etc., and always with the happiest results for the constituents.

In London also the work is going on rapidly. Battersea, through the Labour League, has returned and maintained a Social Democrat on the County Council, who, with the help of other sympathetic members, has been able to forward the cause of labour on that body. Thus, the Council has declined to give contracts for any work which can be done by workmen employed directly, without the intervention of a contractor. No contracts are given to any employers who do not pay the recognised standard of wages, or comply with the conditions of labour laid down by the trade unions of workers concerned in such contracts. The Council has also agreed to pay its own employees the rate of wages considered "fair" in the various trades.

This is a considerable advance upon the old system which prevailed in connection with public bodies a few years ago, when the wages of workmen in their employ were often below those paid by private capitalists. The example of the London County Council has been followed by other public bodies to which labour has been able to return representatives. The chief aim of such representatives has been to widen the area of municipal powers and activity as much as possible. In this they have secured, in many instances, the support of men who cannot be considered labour representatives, but who are willing that the municipalities should own the tramways; gas, water, and electric lighting works; should erect and maintain workmen's dwellings, and in other directions assume those functions hitherto looked upon as the peculiar monopoly of individual enterprise. The activity displayed in this direction is one of the most satisfactory signs of the progress of those ideas which have been instilled into the minds of the workers by the Socialists.

Berlin Conference. One of the most important events of late years in the history of the working class movement, was the Conference which took place at Berlin, in 1890, of the representatives of various European countries with regard to labour legislation, with a view to obtaining an international basis for such legislation. It is, however, only important as a sign of the pressure which is being brought to bear upon all *Governments* by the labour movement, and in this connection the reference of the Emperor in his celebrated "Rescript" to the discussions of the 1889 International Congress should not be forgotten. So far as the United Kingdom is concerned, the Conference has been barren of result, with the exception of one Factory Act, the principal clause of which was carried in the House of Commons against the Government that originated the measure. This clause was a slight attempt to place the law relating to child labour in the United Kingdom on an equal footing with those of most other European countries, which are far ahead of us in the matter of child labour. The insincerity of the English Government in the support their representatives gave at the Conference to the proposal that all children under 12 years of age should be prohibited from labour in all countries represented at Berlin, was shown by their opposition to the proposal to raise the age of half-timers to eleven years. Other European countries where such laws are not already in force are acting upon the recommendations of the Conference, The United Kingdom, which up to the present has

boasted of its splendid laws for the protection of labour, will soon find itself behind the most reactionary countries of the Continent.

Labour Commission. The establishment of a Royal Commission on Labour by the Government is another proof of the great impression made by the new movement upon the politicians of the middle and upper classes. When the Commission was first suggested, many thought the Government were actuated by a genuine desire to obtain accurate information as to the condition of the working classes, and were prepared, if necessary, to bring forward measures for the amelioration of that condition. But when the composition of the Commission was made known, those who had been for a moment deceived, were completely disillusioned. It was thought that labour would be represented at least to the extent of one-half the number of Commissioners. But the "Stupid Party" has no longer a Disraeli to inspire it, and let a magnificent chance slip through its fingers. Instead of the fairly representative Labour Commission hoped for, it was found that for six labour representatives there were twenty-one representatives of the interests of capital, and the selection of the "labour representatives" only increased the dissatisfaction felt at the constitution of the Commission. Only one advocate for a universal Legal Eight Hours Day was asked to serve upon it, and with the exception of one or two who are in favour of the eight hours day by legal enactment *for men engaged in special industries*, such as miners, railway workers, &c, the whole of the "representatives of labour" on the Commission are *against* the limitation of adult labour by law. Nothing further is needed to show that the Government which constituted the Commission, only means to use it as an election dodge to gain the confidence of the workers during the coming election, and as an excuse for shelving such questions as the Eight Hours Day and others of the same kind, which the new movement has brought to the front, and which are now pressing for solution.

Internationalism. Finally, a word upon the immense advance of the *International* side of the working class movement in the United Kingdom. We need but refer to the Miners' Congresses; to the efforts of the Sailors and Firemen to enter into direct communication with their fellow-workers abroad; to the financial help given by workers of one nation to those of another within the last few months, e.g., by the Nottingham Lace Workers to the Lace Workers of Calais; by Calais to Manningham; by the English to the Lyons Glass Blowers; by Austria to the brickmakers, and to the appointing, at the suggestion of the G.W. & G.L.U., "of secretaries in all countries where the laws admitted of such appointments, who should be in communication with all the other international secretaries." In Germany, Hungary, and Austria, the appointing of such secretaries has not been possible, but the international correspondence has been undertaken by men who are willing, and are in a position to carry it on.

Conclusion. To sum up. What has been done in Great Britain and Ireland within the last two years may seem little when compared with what has been done abroad. We have, so far, only one Socialist in the House of Commons, and one Socialist upon the London County Council. But in several provincial towns, as well as in London, there are working class representatives on Local Boards, Town Councils, Vestries, &c., &c. We cannot compare either with the million and a half German Social-Democratic voters, and their

thirty-five members, or with the French Working Men's Party. We have also to admit that we have not (like the Continental workers from Denmark to Hungary, and from Sweden to Spain) a working class press, i.e., organs belonging to a definitely constituted working class party. Such papers as we have are either private property, run more or less as a speculation, and which, while they do good work in their way for a time, cannot be relied upon; or they are newspapers, giving very valuable information, no doubt, but absolutely no theoretical teaching; or, as in the case of the Social Democratic Federation organ, *Justice*, they belong to sects, and do not reach the mass of the workers.

But still there is, at last, a genuine working class movement in England, and its success since 1889 augurs well for the formation of a Labour Party, distinct from all other political parties. Above all, the feeling of class consciousness and the understanding of the class struggle have grown beyond all expectation, and with them the knowledge of the solidarity of labour all the world over. Each nation has, and must have, its own special means and methods of work. But whatever those means and methods, the end is one all the world over — the emancipation of the working class, the abolition of all class rule.

Long live the International Solidarity of the Working Class Movement!

1. Just as this Report is going to press, the decision of the Court in the Plymouth case has been given. It is in favour of the workers. The astounding decision of Mr. Bompas, the Recorder of Plymouth has been unanimously over-ruled by a Court consisting of the Lord Chief Justice of England and four other judges. It is not, even in the eyes of the law, intimidation to call upon members of a Trade Union to cease working for a particular master or company. This result is a great victory for labour and of incalculable importance to the working class movement.
